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Written statement* submitted by the Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 August 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Human rights abuses in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) would like to use the occasion of the 30th Session of the Human Rights Council to call attention to the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the State of Qatar's continued human rights abuses. Throughout 2015, these countries have acted to suppress free speech and assembly by imprisoning peaceful activists on arbitrary charges. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees at the hands of security forces remain pervasive issues in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

The Government of Bahrain has made no significant progress towards cooperating with UN human rights mechanisms in 2015. Arbitrary detentions of peaceful opposition activists and human rights defenders have continued unchecked. Bahrain's growing restrictions on free speech have contributed to a situation where the government detains activists with impunity, while laws criminalizing insults to the king, government or national emblems and banning protests have curtailed free expression. Recent amendments to the anti-terrorism law enable government security officers to persecute dissenters under the guise of national security. The amendments allow the Public Prosecution to issue detention orders of up to 90 days without justification, with the option for extension. Under Bahraini law, the Public Prosecutor has the authority to hold individuals for up to six months without trial. It is during this pre-trial detention period that security forces often perpetrate acts of torture to coerce confessions. Such laws and practices enable the government to repress dissenting voices and enable a culture of impunity for security forces.

Bahraini authorities have increasingly used these laws to imprison political opposition members and human rights defenders. Ebrahim Sharif, former General-Secretary of the opposition party Wa'ad, was released from prison on 19 June 2015 after serving over four years of his arbitrary sentence. Less than a month after his release, however, security forces arrested him on new charges related to a peaceful speech he delivered on 10 July 2015. Sharif was charged with "inciting violence" and "promoting political change." The Government of Bahrain additionally sentenced Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary-General of the opposition party al-Wefaq, to four years in prison in June for public remarks that were critical of the government. Salman was charged with publicly inciting hatred, disturbing public peace, inciting civil disobedience, insulting public institutions, and promoting change in government. In March 2015, the government arrested Fadhel Abbas, Secretary-General of al-Wahdawi Society, for critical comments he made on Twitter. On 28 June, a court sentenced Abbas to five years in prison. Additional political opposition figures like Abdulwahab Hussain and Hasan Mushaima continue to serve arbitrary life sentences. The Government of Bahrain pardoned prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab on 13 July 2015 after he had served the majority of his sentence related to Twitter activity, but he faces further charges related to his freedom of expression that carry lengthy prison sentences. Many other high-profile activists, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace, are serving sentences for acts solely relating to free expression, association, and assembly.

Bahrain's prisons afford few protections for the detainees that have been arrested since the 2011 protests. On 10 March 2015, detainees at Jau Prison rioted over the effects of overcrowding and over-incarceration. Authorities responded with excessive force, reportedly attacking prisoners with rubber bullets, tear gas, and shotguns. Prisoners reported mass beatings as reprisals. The Government of Bahrain has yet to carry out an investigation into the authorities' violent response to the riot. Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace, a member of the group of imprisoned political activists known as the Bahrain 13, marked his 150th day of protest against the ill-treatment of inmates and the unsanitary conditions in Jau Prison on 18 August 2015. He remains in solitary confinement at Al-Qalaa Hospital without access to novels, religious books, television, radio, or pen and paper.

Saudi Arabia has escalated its persecution of activists as authorities have implemented repressive laws targeted at those who express dissent. Since 2014, the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism has allowed the Ministry of Interior to detain individuals for up to a year before a Specialized Criminal Court must determine whether the detention is valid. The Anti-Terror Law additionally makes it a crime to harm any interest of the Saudi state, enabling the government to round up anyone who presses for reforms. Last year, a Saudi court sentenced human rights lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair to 15 years in prison under the law. The king retains absolute control over the legal system, reserving the power to directly appoint and dismiss judges. Oversight of the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution remains under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior rather than the Ministry of Justice, severely hampering judicial independence.

Saudi Arabia continues to abuse the basic human rights of its citizens. The guardianship system requires women to obtain permission from their male guardians in order to work, travel, study, and marry. Activists, both female and male, have been targeted by authorities for advocating for the removal of the guardianship system. Saudi law treats women as perpetual minors, and because much of the law pertaining to women is not codified, judges have broad discretionary powers. Saudi Basic Law does not contain provisions criminalizing rape, leaving rape cases open to subjective interpretation. Rape cases often result in the punishment of victims since judges may decide that a rape resulted from a woman's mingling with men. The Kingdom has also stepped up its use of capital and corporal punishment against dissenters. Between 2010 and 2013, Saudi Arabia beheaded at least 345 people, in addition to executions by other methods. In October 2014, a Saudi court sentenced opposition activist Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr to death on charges of fomenting dissent and disloyalty to the government. Since January of 2015, Saudi Arabia has executed more than 120 citizens.

The State of Qatar has similarly acted to quash free expression and political activism. GCC security provisions allow Qatar to suppress peaceful expression that authorities interpret as critical of state actions. Since 2011, security officials have detained a number of people for exercising their rights to free expression and assembly. Many have reported torture and ill-treatment during detention. Qatari authorities arrested the poet Mohammed al-Ajami in November of 2011 on charges relating to a private poetry recital in Cairo. Al-Ajami was charged with insulting the emir and "inciting to overthrow the ruling system." Authorities held him incommunicado for months before he was allowed family visits. Al-Ajami's detention and trial were marred by procedural irregularities, with Qatari authorities attempting to assign him two different lawyers after he had obtained counsel and blocking al-Ajami's lawyer from testifying in court. The court eventually sentenced al-Ajami to life imprisonment on 29 November 2012, though the sentence was reduced to 15 years upon appeal. Al-Ajami's case highlights the stifling environment for free expression in Qatar, as well as a wide range of flaws in the judicial system.

Migrant workers that have flowed into Qatar in the lead-up to the 2022 World Cup have suffered human rights abuses at the hands of their employers. The *kafala* sponsorship system traps Qatar's more than 1.5 million migrant workers in positions working for predatory companies. For these workers, it is illegal to seek alternative employment without the permission of their current employers. Some migrant workers are forced to work twelve hour days in extreme heat. Workers often find their wages to be significantly less than what was promised in their contracts, and some have had their wages completely withheld. Confiscation of workers' passports remains a common practice.

Activists in the United Arab Emirates have faced mass arrests and detentions related to their political activity. In 2011, a group of activists petitioned the president calling for democracy and increased legislative powers. The government rounded up many of the activists, claiming that they were planning a coup, and arrested 94 individuals beginning on 26 March 2012. At least 44 defendants spent between six and eleven months in detention without appearing before a judge, and up to 70 were held in secret detention. The 94 include prominent lawyers, judges, and academics. Allegations of torture against the defendants were not investigated. During the trial a number of UN Special Rapporteurs expressed concern about procedural irregularities. Confessions obtained under duress were accepted as evidence, and guards blocked international observers from entering the courtroom. Sixty-nine of the defendants were found guilty of "founding an organization with intent to overthrow the government" on 2 July 2013. Sixty-one remain imprisoned in the UAE for legitimate acts of free expression and assembly.

The Kingdoms of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the State of Qatar have not made any meaningful progress towards improving their records on human rights. We ask the international community to call for the release of all those imprisoned on politically motivated charges, to investigate the systematic use of torture, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detentions, and to promote the independence of the judiciary in these countries. We hope that renewed international pressure will encourage these governments to address their human rights abuses.